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Selling a Policy to Public

U.S. Intelligence Data on Central America Has Not Translated Into Support for Plans

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WASHINGTON, March 14 — For the last two weeks, the Reagan Administration has conducted what senior officials acknowledge has been an intense public relations campaign designed to dispel doubts about its policies in Central America. The effort, which has relied heavily on the use of intelligence information, has produced mixed results.

Until Friday, officials thought they were making significant headway. Some members of Congress, including several influential committee chairmen, came away from private intelligence briefings saying they were convinced that the Administration had strong evidence to support its charges of Soviet and Cuban involvement in Central America and of Nicaraguan aid to guerrillas in El Salvador.

The public was given a glimpse of the intelligence material when the Administration made public aerial reconnaissance photographs in an effort to show that Nicaragua, with Cuban and Soviet assistance, was assembling the largest military force in Central America.

Then on Friday, the campaign received a major blow when a young Nicaraguan captured last year while fighting with the guerrillas in El Salvador surprised the State Department at a news conference by denying, rather than confirming, Cuban and Nicaraguan involvement in the Salvadoran conflict.

Aides Reconsider Situation

That unexpected development has prompted a reappraisal of the public relations offensive among senior Administration officials who must decide Monday whether to proceed with additional intelligence briefings for Congress and the press tentatively scheduled for later in the week.

The pressure appears to be great to go through with the briefings. According to several senior officials, the initial decision to conduct the public relations campaign was considered long overdue. "We made a mistake," one senior official said last week. "We were pressing ahead with a policy before we had convinced either Congress or the public about the nature of the nation's vital interests in Central America."

State Department officials recently concluded that most of the opposition to the Administration's Central America policy was generated by what one official called "humanitarian" concerns.

By that, he said, he meant opposition was primarily coming from organizations and individuals whose main interest was to prevent further conflict.

Missing from this perspective, officials said, was an understanding of national security considerations. "We failed to make our case convincingly even in Congress," another senior Administration official said. "We decided to go back to square one, lay out the evidence we have and hope we could build the kind of broad-based support that has been lacking."

The campaign focused on Congress. Senior intelligence officials, led by William J. Casey, the Director of Central Intelligence, started briefing Congressional committees about what the Administration considers to be Cuban, Soviet and Nicaraguan interference in El Salvador.

According to members of Congress who attended the briefings, the Administration based most of these charges on intelligence collected through electronic surveillance of radio traffic in El Salvador and surrounding nations, including Nicaragua.

Collected largely by Navy destroyers that have been positioned off the coast of El Salvador and Nicaragua since late last year, this information included details of communications between Salvadoran rebels and command posts in Nicaragua, which they said showed that the Salvadoran insurgency was controlled in Nicaragua. Administration officials told the committees, according to several members. Similar briefings were given to a group of former senior Government officials.

'Convincing Intelligence'

The Administration was encouraged by the results. After a briefing given to the House Intelligence Committee, the panel's chairman, Representative Edward P. Boland, a Massachusetts Democrat who is considered a bellwether of moderate Congressional opinion, said that the use of Nicaraguan sites for command and control of Salvadoran insurgent forces was supported by "convincing intelligence." He added that "Cuban involvement, especially in providing arms, is also evident."

Senator Richard G. Lugar, Republican of Indiana, said, "The case of substantial involvement of outside countries is absolutely clear."

Even critics of the Administration's policy were persuaded that some external involvement exists. "I don't think that anyone disputes that there is some foreign involvement in El Salvador," said Senator Paul E. Tsongas, Democrat of Massachusetts. "The question is how much and how significant it is."

That question was apparently not resolved by the Administration's campaign. Critics, for example, pointed out that the photographs showing a major military buildup in Nicaragua did not prove that Nicaragua was aiding the Salvadoran guerrillas.

Senator Christopher J. Dodd, Democrat of Connecticut, a leading critic of Administration policy, said that "to suggest that Nicaragua is the only source of support for Salvadoran guerrillas is ridiculous." He said that the guerrillas received substantial amounts of arms and ammunition from sources within El Salvador, including disloyal army troops.

Nicaragua's Ambassador in Washington, Francisco Faillos Navarro, responding to the intelligence made public about his country, charged in an interview broadcast by the Cable News Network today that the military buildup was forced because the "Reagan Administration is threatening us all the time with the possibility of a military intervention."

Still other critics argued that the Administration was overemphasizing the military problem in El Salvador. "The problem in El Salvador is primarily an economic one," said Senator Claiborne Pell, Democrat of Rhode Island, the ranking minority member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Despite the lingering doubts and Friday's turnabout by the Nicaraguan captive, Orlando José Tardencillas Espinosa, senior Administration officials still believe in the power of their intelligence data. "Whenever we can sit down with someone and show them what we've got, we can persuade them Cuba and Nicaragua are involved," one official said.

What the Administration cannot do, top officials acknowledge, is translate intelligence information about outside interference in Central America into support for the Government's policy.